Knowledge E
Engaging minds

Conference Paper

New Languages of the Avant-garde and Symbolic "Opening" of the Soviet Urban Areas

Mikhail Ilchenko

Institute of Philosophy and Law, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

The article analyzes the potential of the avant-garde architecture to give a boost to the development of the Soviet urban areas under current conditions. The author states that the growing interest to the objects of the avant-garde heritage contributed to the appearance of the new vision of the Soviet urban districts filling them with new meanings and symbolic values. For that reason, the proposed paper aims to outline and describe the main narratives of the Soviet avant-garde architecture that have taken shape in recent decades and have gradually established in a public discourse. By means of this exploration the author seeks to trace symbolic transformation of the Soviet urban districts and, thus, to argue that their change under post-Soviet conditions depend not so much on the new urban city-planning initiatives as on the new symbols and meanings that could give a new perception of these spaces in the current social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Soviet avant-garde architecture, urban areas, discourses, practices of representation, languages of description, utopia, creative industries, cultural initiatives

Corresponding Author:
Mikhail Ilchenko
msilchenko@mail.ru

Received: 26 April 2018
Accepted: 25 May 2018
Published: 7 June 2018

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ISPS Convention 2017 Conference Committee.

Symbolic transformation proved to become one of the major challenges for the Soviet urban areas after the fall of socialism. Along with the loss of social and urban function these territories lost any clear symbols and narratives which previously shaped their general image and ways of perception [7, 25, 26]. A sudden vanishing of representation mechanisms meant for them an actual turning into a sort of "forsaken" or "invisible" spaces: their old symbols were no longer reproduced whereas the new ones didn't appear yet. For that reason, it makes sense to explore the ways which allow the Soviet urban areas to adjust to the new conditions in symbolic terms as well as to reveal those impulses that can generate such changes.

The districts of the Soviet avant-garde mass housing can be considered as the areas where the processes of symbolic renewal proved to be especially intensive in the

last years. An increasing concern for the Soviet avant-garde architecture of 1920-1930s among urban scholars, designers, artists and social activists led not only to the promotion of the avant-garde itself but actually meant a symbolic reconsideration of the whole urban districts [3–5, 14, 24]. This is particularly well illustrated by those areas where avant-garde buildings represent complex housing and public development which define a general urban structure of the area – that is, different industrial districts, the territories of the former "socialist cities", various communal housing living zones etc. In this regard, it is important to understand what kind of new discourses of the Soviet avant-garde have appeared in the recent time, what symbols and meanings they shape and, finally, how they influence a general perception of these urban areas.

1. Beyond the "Soviet"

The discourse of "heritage" can be considered as a first attempt to speak on the avant-garde architecture out of the narrow framework of specialized knowledge. Meanwhile its significance lies not only in the fact that it made the avant-garde buildings a subject of public debates and "opened" it for a broad audience, but primarily – in the opportunity to view the Soviet avant-garde architecture beyond the "Soviet" context. "Discourse of heritage" managed to create and maintain a symbolic distance between the avant-garde architecture itself and its social and political backgrounds. Suddenly, it turned out that grey and insignificantly looking buildings possessed an undeniable architectural value; that they claimed to become an official part of historical heritage, on par with medieval churches and classicist architectural ensembles; and, on top of this, that they stood a good chance to become a part of 'global cultural context'. In popular perception, this resulted in the clash of two seemingly completely incompatible realities: one – mundane, routine and insignificant, the other – universally important, valuable, belonging to the historical heritage.

This effect was particularly amplified in the discourse of the former Soviet industrial districts and "socialist cities" which were unexpectedly discovered as part of global artistic trends. Thus, for instance, in the early 2000s, the initiative launched by German experts brought to life collaborative Russian-German project "Bauhaus in Ural" (*Bauhaus na Urale)*, with the goal to find the traces of works that the graduates of this famous school had produced for the Ural industrial construction projects of 1930s (see e.g. [2, 22]). An influence of Bauhaus on architectural process in various cities of Urals (Magnitogorsk, Orsk, Nizhni Tagil etc.) seriously differed: in those cases where European specialists were directly engaged into the city plan development it

appeared to be really significant while in the other cases it was rather small or even almost invisible. But notwithstanding this, the symbolic importance of belonging to the advanced modern architectural school for all these territories was much higher than any practical effect o precise historical data. In early 2000s, simply being made aware of this connection was enough to produce a powerful emotional impact. "Bauhaus architect working here in our Uralmash?", "Did the graduate of this famous school really work in Uralmash!..." – these are the typical reactions by the residents in response to the newly discovered historical evidence (see e.g. [19], p. 206; [11]).

The importance of this amazement and surprise was that it helped to wrench and liberate the space of the Soviet districts from its habitual perceptive context. The areas that used to invoke associations only with the "Soviet" and the "industrial", unfolded before the wider audience in a completely new light. Familiar buildings that used to be nothing more than a background of ordinary urban existence were now presented to the public as the examples of a unique aesthetics possessing undeniable historical and artistic value. Half-desolate marginal space was becoming a "constructivist legacy".

In fact, the "heritage" discourse provided the first means to talk publicly about the Soviet urban areas out of any ideological and political context. The new rhetoric was fast accepted by the post-Soviet society: city-building experiments and avant-garde constructions were turned into "monuments", "cultural heritage" and "protected objects". They now became not only the "historical examples of style", but a part of "global heritage". Thus, for instance, the Uralmash district was increasingly labeled as "open air museum" and "constructivist Mecca" gradually becoming one of the most discussed architectural sites in Ekaterinburg (see e.g. [23], [21], Pp. 226-231; [2, 12]). Moreover, numerous experimental urban areas of the early Soviet era were described in detail, catalogued, included in various protection lists and registers.

But despite the significance of the "heritage" discourse in the popularization and symbolic renewal of the Soviet urban districts, very soon it turned out that the potential of this discourse was quite limited. It was built on a very simple logic: if an object possesses a cultural / historical / artistic, or some other value, then this value has to be proved and confirmed by giving this object an appropriate status. In other words, to become a part of "heritage", an object has to be singled out and excluded, as it were, from the range of ordinary objects. And, most importantly, it has to be officially recognized.

That was particularly evident in the policy of "museumification" of the past, a "tagging" process of sorts, ranking buildings and urban areas according to how well they

fit a concrete style, or an author, or an era – and, as a result, transforming such buildings into "monuments' and "artefacts". Not surprisingly that the discussions of the Soviet urban heritage popularized such rhetorical figures as "open air museum", "city-monument", "collection of constructivist monuments", "avant-garde preserve" etc.

However, it became obvious very quickly that by declaring Soviet architectural areas "museums" and adding new items to "protected buildings" listings, the problem was put rather than solved. Its solution required new approaches and evaluations.

2. "Utopian" Spaces

The "heritage" discourse gave a new impetus to the study of the Soviet urban areas but at the same time provided rather narrow limits for its interpretation. Unique style, unusual aesthetics, bold urban planning decisions, names of forgotten architects: all of this was new; it captivated and intrigued – however, all of this not only did not exhaust the discussion, but, on the contrary, alluded to something larger, some source of deeper meanings hidden behind the individual building, and architectural ensembles, and entire districts. Something that could not be captured by the available language of description.

Following the rise of public interest in the Soviet city-planning heritage, 1920s–1930s architectural ensembles had been targeted more and more frequently by the projects focusing not so much on their stylistic, aesthetic or architectural features, but on the era that they symbolize. Thorough the photographs shown at the numerous exhibitions, through the images of art installations and TV broadcasts, avant-garde urban areas gradually revealed an entire historical epoch, with its hopes, expectations and the feeling of breakneck changes. In the geometrical shapes of buildings and ascetic lines of dilapidated facades, artists, designers, historians and journalists strived to see the contours of the past, to experience its spirit and atmosphere. As a result, new images appeared to represent the Soviet avant-garde architectural sites: "utopian space", "artifact of the Soviet age", "space of hope". And meanwhile very similar architectural, artistic and research projects started to develop in various parts of the post-Soviet space: "Socialist City is a City of a Dream" in Novokuznetsk, "Lost City of the Future" in Zaporizhia, "Utopia of the Past – City of the Future" in Nizhny Novgorod (see e.g. [3, 20, 27]). Thus, gradually, the discourse of "unrealized utopia" emerged, offering an alternative way to talk about the Soviet avant-garde architecture [9].

In 2006 three constructivist districts of Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and Ekaterinburg became a venue of the "Walks for Art" (*Progulki za iskusstvom)* project (The project was organized in September 2006 by PRO ARTE Institute and Ekaterinburg Branch of the National Center for Contemporary Art). The main project's goal was "to discover artistic tradition within the Soviet experience" ([18], Pp. 7-16). The Bateninsky housing estate in Saint-Petersburg, Narkomfin building in Moscow and Uralmash district in Ekaterinburg turned into a space of a specific artistic research experiment. Their yards and neighbourhoods were filled with artists, art historians and curators – all of them seeking to find new meanings and images in the empty space of the "vanished Soviet civilization". In this vein, Uralmash plant, for instance, appeared to project's participants as "fragments, ruins, remnants of the once hyper-intensive life; of the Soviet civilization that vanished into the past"; those ruins still preserved a "superhuman drive, power, takeoff into the future that never came" (Ibid., p. 75). And the district itself became a "ruin, desolate outskirt, backwater"; a place where Soviet past could be experienced in a different way, as something "that harbors the energy of the future" (Ibid., p.77). That was a typical example of a "utopian" look at the Soviet architectural areas.

"Utopian" discourse was inspired by artistic explorations – therefore, it filled in very effectively the holes and empty spaces left by the "heritage" discourse in the ways to interpret and experience the Soviet urban planning experiments. The new discourse has expanded the borders of the subject itself, replacing "monument" and "protected object" with the focus on the bygone era, with its zeitgeist and atmosphere. This discourse also offered new interpretative possibilities, making artistic images as valuable, as the search for new historical evidence. But, probably most importantly, the "utopian" reading brought a new sentimental note into the discussions of the early Soviet architectural areas. Soviet avant-garde architecture became the objects of experience – as well as the Soviet past looming behind it. It was one thing to talk about visually unattractive grey two-storied "boxes" using stock textbook phrases about the new revolutionary type of residential space. And it was a completely different story to picture that buildings as part of a huge unfulfilled vision, an unrealized dream of its era. An act of walking across the Soviet urban zones turned out to become a "time travel", where each ruin and each dilapidated building hid the traces of the bygone era. In such a manner "utopian" discourse seriously helped to create an image of the Soviet avant-garde urban areas that today again attract interest and are being discussed vigorously by the public, intellectuals and urbanists.

3. When "Culture" Matters

The "heritage" discourse and the "unrealized utopia" discourse may seem to be based on totally different assumptions, follow different logic and perceive reality in mutually incompatible ways. But, surprisingly, they are very similar in one key aspect: they cannot contemplate the *present* of the Soviet architecture. For the "heritage" rhetoric, the objects of the Soviet architectural avant-garde are potential monuments – therefore, they seem to belong to a timeless space that exist in something like a parallel reality, with zero connections to the routine course of life. The "utopia" discourse imagine Soviet urban areas of the interwar period as an abstract future that will never come, associating it with a hope that will never become a reality. Taking this into account, the next logical question would be: how are we going to make the Soviet urban areas a part of the actualities of today, if even our language of description has already separated these areas from reality? Particularly, if most of these areas continue to be a part of the districts with many thousands of residents covering the territory huge even by the standards of a million-plus city.

Experience of work in functional transforming of the avant-garde architectural objects still remains very poor under post-Soviet conditions. The cases when these objects would be successfully revitalized or, at least, would acquire a new functional usage (even if temporary) are still quite few and rather fragmented. Still even these cases allow to see a certain trend in the attempts to animate Soviet architectural heritage which became evident in the recent years. Thus, the open spaces of the Soviet urban areas usually turn into a venue for a large-scale public events, art and musical festivals or any other cultural projects and initiatives (see [8, 16, 20]), whereas the architectural complexes themselves are either transforming into the art space [1, 17] or being reconstructed in order to restore previous social and cultural function of the Soviet time (generally – of the "centers of culture" or different educational institutions – see e.g. [10, 12]).

In one way or another all these projects become associated with a word "culture" and various forms of "cultural activities". On the one hand, such emphasis on "cultural" aspects seems to be perfectly natural: it follows logically the major trends of "creativity" and of the introduction of "creative industries" into the urban space [6, 13, 15]. However, "cultural" rhetoric has another additional meaning for working with the Soviet urban sites and objects. It is a way to introduce this heritage into the present and to put it into the current context, filling it with relevant meanings. "Culture" here is ultimately synonymous with the present, and the "cultural" discourse is a way to

imagine the former Soviet area as existing "here and now"; to mark it as a part of living urban environment. Unsurprisingly that the image of these revitalized Soviet architectural areas – renewed and dynamic, being a part of contemporary urban patterns – is inevitably conceived, phrased and represented through the categories of "cultural development", "cultural potential" and "cultural space".

All of this could have been described as yet another variation on a theme of "ideal future" and "new utopia" – if the "cultural" discourse were not appropriated and reproduced by official public rhetoric. The talks about establishing a new "cultural cluster" and employing efficiently a unique "cultural resource" have rather quickly penetrated and become entrenched in presentations, concepts and documents discussed by local officials, developer companies and business community. Moreover, many development problems faced by the Soviet urban districts – such as the preservation of a number of architectural monuments, the use of public spaces, or the reclamation of green areas – were publicly articulated for the first time through such forms of presentation. In this sense, "cultural" rhetoric has essentially become the first way to engage public activists, officials and business in a meaningful dialogue about the fate of the avant-garde architectural sites. By appealing to the "cultural practices" and "creative industries", city public and intellectuals managed to enunciate more clearly their projects and visions for historical urban area and the avant-garde heritage, while the authorities became open to their ideas precisely because they were expressed in this manner and this language.

It is quite probable that the "cultural" interpretation will become only a transitional way of talking about the Soviet architectural heritage, serving just to delineate a future space for discussions. However, right now and within the present context, "cultural" rhetoric can discern in the Soviet urban areas something that no other rhetoric could. It can discover the previously concealed or non-evident meanings of its architecture, urban development, spatial structure or general symbols. With the change of context – social, architectural, economic and intellectual – this space will most likely require new meanings and interpretations; or, maybe, it will turn to the existing ones, resurrecting the past symbols.

The shifts in the language used to describe architecture and historic urban areas are perfectly natural: it is as important for their development and embeddedness in the current patterns of life, as their physical renovation or change of the environment. Such districts require new languages and symbols in order to be included in the ongoing urban processes and current social dynamics. Under the present conditions the ways of speaking on the Soviet urban heritage seem to be not less important than practical

mechanisms of its implementation. And it is quiet likely that just this new symbolical view will provide a basis for the development of a coherent urban planning strategy and, probably, will help to shape a new attitude towards these spaces in the current social, economic and cultural context.

Acknowledgement

This publication has been produced with the support of the Grant of the President of the Russian Federation MK-8766.2016.6.

References

[1] Albokrinova, A. 2017. "Vokrug Fabriki-kuhni. Anons lekcii ob istorii Samarskoj fabriki-kuhni v Srednevolzhskom filiale GCSI" ["Around the Factory-kitchen". Announcement of the lecture about history of the Factory-kitchen in Samara to be held in the Middle Volga Branch of NCCA]. Retrieved from: http://www.ncca.ru/events.text?filial=9&id=4396

[2] "Bauhaus na Urale. Ot Solikamska do Orska." 2008. [Bauhaus in the Urals. From Solikamsk to Orsk]. *Materialy mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii*. Ekaterinburg: "Webster."

[3] Belova E. and A. Savitskaya. 2011. *Kommunal'nyj avangard: kat.-putevoditel'* [Communal avant-garde: catalogue-guide book]. Nizhnij Novgorod: NCCA Volga-Vyatka region branch.

[4] Bondarenko, I.A. ed. 2015. *Han-Magomedovskie* chtenija: materialy mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii, 18-20 janvarja 2012 g. Filial FGBU «CNIIP Minstroja Rossii» NIITIAG [Han-Magomedov's readings: materials of the scientific conference, 18-20 January 2012, Filial FGBU «CNIIP Minstroja Rossii» NIITIAG]. Moscow, Saint-Petersburg: Kolo.

[5] Chepkunova, I. 2014. *Kuznica bol'shoj arhitektury. Sovetskie konkursy 1920-1950-h.* [Powerhouse of Big Architecture. Soviet architectural competitions of 1920-1950s]. Moscow: Iskusstvo XXI vek.

[6] Florida, R. 2005. *Cities and the Creative Class*. New York, London: Routledge.

[7] Golovneva, E. V. 2016. "Mifologizacija ede sposob konstruirovanija gorodskoj identichnosti (Ekaterinburg na internet-forumah)" [Mythologization as a means of urban identity constructing (Ekaterinburg in internet-forums)]. *Ural'skij istoriceskij vestnik,* 52 (3):43-51.

[8] Ilchenko, M. 2016. "'Green' Utopia of the Uralmash: Institutional Effects and Symbolic Meaning." *Critical Housing Analysis,* 3 (2): 52-60.

[9] Ilchenko, M. 2017. "Nezavershjonnyj proekt kak forma vosprijatija sovetskogo gradostroitel'stva 1920-1930-h godov: opyt socialisticheskih gorodov" [Unfinished project as a way to conceive the Soviet urban planning of 1920-1930s: the case of Socialist Cities]. *Siberian Historical Research,* 2: 56-79.

[10] Ilchenko, M. 2012. "Soviet Avant-Garde Architecture by Post-Soviet Eyes: the Fate of the Uralmash House of Culture." *Catalogue of the 2nd Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art.* Ekaterinburg.

[11] Japakov, A. 2002. "Vozvrashhenie imeni: Bela Sheffler" [The Return of the Name: Béla Scheffler]. *Nauka i zhizn',* no. 12.

[12] Kropotov, S. et al., ed. 2014. *Budushhee proshlogo: futurologija DK UZTM* [The Future of the past: futurology the Uralmash Palace of Culture]. Ekaterinburg: Ekaterinburg Academy of Contemporary Art.

[13] Landry, C. 2008. *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*. 2nd ed. London: Earthscan.

[14] Obermair, V. and E. Shapiro-Obermair. 2008. *Bol'shaja Moskva, kotoroj ne bylo. Zdanija sovetskogo avangarda v sovremennoj Moskve* [Big Moscow which didn't exist. Buildings of the Soviet Avant-garde in contemporary Moscow]. Viena, SCHLEBRÜGGE.EDITOR.

[15] Peck, J. 2008. "The Cult of Urban Creativity." *Kreativen: Wirkung. Urbane Kultur, Wissensökonomie Und Stadtpolitik. Bildung und Kultur.* Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2: 36-41.

[16] "'Perevospityvaja' Uralmash: bul'var Kul'tury reshili preobrazit' zooparkom, katkom i gastrofestami. Interv'ju s V.Belous." 2016. ["Rehabilitating" Uralmash: Bolevard of Culture Planned to Transform with Zoo, Ring Skate and Gastrofests. Interview with Vera Belous]. Retrieved from: http://www.e1.ru/news/spool/news_id-452471-section_id-182.html

[17] "Proekt 'Belaja Bashnja'. Koncepcija". 2015. [The "White Tower" project. Conception].Retrieved from: http://www.tower1929.ru/dokumenty-proekta

[18] *Progulki za iskusstvom: Leningrad – Moskva – Sverdlovsk.* 2008. [Walks for art: Leningrad-Moscow-Sverdlovsk]. Saint-Petersburg: «Institut PRO ARTE».

[19] Rastorguyev, A. 2011. "Nasledie jeksperimenta. Iz istorii arhitekturnogo avangarda na Urale" [The Heritage of an Experiment. From the History of Architectural Avant-Garde in Ural]. *Ural*, 8: 205-223.

[20] "Socgorod – gorod mechty. Reportazh ob art-proekte v Novokuznetske". 2013. [Socialist City is a City of a Dream. Report on the art-project in Novokuznetsk]. 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.tvn-tv.ru/news/mountains_economy/sotsgorod_gorod_mechty.html

[21] Starikov, A., V. Zvagelskaya, L. Tokmeninova, and E. Cherniak. 1998. *Ekaterinburg - istorija goroda v arhitekture.* [Ekaterinburg: History of the City through Architecture]. Ekaterinburg: "Sokrat".

[22] Tokmeninova, L.I. ed. 2010. *Bauhaus na Urale. Sohranenie nasledija: materialy mezhdunarodnogo nauchnogo seminara, 22-24 avgusta 2008 g., Ekaterinburg* [Bauhaus in the Urals. Preservation of the Heritage: Materials of the International Research Seminar, 22-24 August, 2008 Ekaterinburg]. Ekaterinburg: "Webster".

[23] "Uralmash: Proizvodstvo budushhego. Koncepcija proekta" [Uralmash: Producing the Future. Project's Concept]. 2016. Retrieved from: http://uralmashidea.ru/o-proekte.html

[24] Vasiliev N.Y., E.B. Ovsiannikova, T.A. Voronzova, A.V. Tukanov, M.A. Tukanov and O.A. Panin.2014. *Arhitektura Moskvy perioda NJePa i Pervoj pjatiletki* [Architecture of Moscow in the period of NEP and the First Five-Year Plan]. Moscow.: ABCdesign.

[25] Veselkova, N., Vandyshev, M., & Pryamikova, E. 2016. "Diskurs prirody v molodyh gorodah" [The discourse of nature in young towns]. *Sociologiceskoe obozrenie,* 15 (1):112-133.

[26] Veselkova, N., Vandyshev, M., & Pryamikova, E. 2017. "Molodye goroda: masshtaby mest pamjati" [Young towns: scaling sites of memory]. *Sociologicheskoe obozrenie,* 16 (3):36-65.

[27] "Zaterjannyj gorod budushhego. Anons vystavki «Bol'shoe Zaporozh'e 1930. Zaterjannyj gorod budushhego»".2011. [Announcement of the exhibition "Big Zaporizhia 1930. Lost City of the Future"].Retrieved from: http://afisha.zp.ua/vystavki/zateryannyy-gorod-buduschego_1304.html